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THE (END OF THE) AMERICAN DREAM
THE POLITICAL IMAGE OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

Theses of Ph.D. dissertation

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Research background, identifying the problem

It has been nearly six decades since communist sympathizer Lee Harvey Oswald aimed his Italian-made Mannlicher-Carcano sniper rifle from a window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository and fired three rounds at the open limousine of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, on November 22, 1963, at 12:30 p.m. Most people in the country learned about the death of the president from Walter Cronkite. The reporter, who had already become a legend, interrupted an episode of the soap opera *As The World Turns* and announced that shots had been fired at the president's motorcade in downtown Dallas. Less than half an hour later, CBS interrupted its program once again: A shocked Cronkite, in a quavering voice, shared the terrible news: "The President is dead." Within about five hours, the news of the tragedy had reached almost every American household.

In the successful series *House of Cards*, Claire Underwood responds to a CNN reporter's question about her most definitive childhood memory by saying that it was the time "when my father took me to Dealey Plaza, where Kennedy was assassinated." The title hero in *Forrest Gump*, a movie that won six Oscars and three Golden Globes, recounts how he met this "nice, young president" who was shot for "no particular reason." Stephen King, the uncrowned "king of horror," spends 1,200 pages in his novel *11/22/63* toying with the idea that if a small-town English teacher could go back in time and

stop Lee Harvey Oswald from killing Kennedy, then it would change the course of history and stop the world's decay. The outrageous name of the cult punk band Dead Kennedys was synonymous with the thought that the American dream died with Jack and Bobby Kennedy. The passing of the president inspired some of the biggest stars, including Sting, Simon & Garfunkel, John Lennon and the Beach Boys. In fact, we bump into Kennedy all around the world: in Berlin (John-F.-Kennedy-Platz), New York (JFK International Airport) and Paris (the Louvre). Some journalists began to compare the former British prime minister Tony Blair to Kennedy, and, referring to the close relationship between the Kennedy brothers, they started calling Peter Mandelson "Bobby."

JFK's speeches occupy a special place among the famous texts of American and world history. According to a ranking compiled before the turn of the millennium by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Texas, Kennedy's inauguration address is considered to be second to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech on the list of the most influential speeches that shaped American history. Similarly, the American *Time* magazine considers this JFK speech the seventh most significant.

According to a survey conducted by *The Economist* and YouGov in 2013, 60 percent of Americans view Kennedy as an "excellent or mostly excellent" president, while only 6 percent of respondents

believe that his performance was “below average.” Only Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan could reach levels similar to John F. Kennedy’s ratings.

Assessing the opinions of 91 historians, C-SPAN found in 2017 that Kennedy ranks eighth on a list that evaluates presidents’ moral prestige and crisis-management skills.

It can be stated without exaggeration that the almost mythical, political profile of John F. Kennedy is left unquestioned even by his affairs with women, his health, and the realistic assessment of his foreign and domestic policies. Some of these cases even boosted his popular image (like his affair with Marilyn Monroe). To this day, not even the most insignificant stories about the Kennedys could escape the public’s notice. It is mostly Jack and Jackie, as well as Rose and Bobby, in the spotlight, but other members of the family, too, keep many journalists, biographers and historians busy in the U.S. and abroad. The question arises: Had he not been a Kennedy, would biographers and historians have paid this much attention to Bobby’s three-year term as Attorney General and the fact that he was assassinated as a presidential candidate (June 6, 1968)? Had he not been the son of JFK, would the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. in 1999 have attracted the scrutiny of the global press? Would they have penned a book about “America’s reluctant prince” 21 years after his death? Based on these signs, with all of their merits and weaknesses, the Kennedy family fills Americans’ longing for a royal family, as

they relate to them in the same, ambivalent way: with both respect and critique.

Curse or blessing? The problems of the Kennedy historiography

Probably few American presidents have had the honor of seeing a book (White, Theodore H. *The Making of the President*, 1960) about their presidential campaign win a Pulitzer Prize during their years in office, nor have a Hollywood movie (*PT-109*) made about their heroic stand in World War II, starring the Academy Award-winning Cliff Robertson. Kennedy, however, achieved both. Despite the fact that he was murdered almost six decades ago, the myths around him ensured that his life remains a popular topic with American historians. According to certain estimates, more than 10,000 volumes have been published about JFK since his death. The question is, whether this makes researchers' jobs easier or more difficult? Only a few good or excellent works exist about Kennedy.

Kennedy's story embodies the American dream (from a Hungarian perspective, the dream of the folktale hero). This is the reason why most of the public considers Kennedy a celebrity first, and a president second, keeping historians from diving into deeper analysis. And the reason for the abundance of these superficial, empty books is due to the (non-existent) pressure on authors to come up with a sensational, never-before-seen story about the late

president. Some even hit utopian tones and wonder what would have happened if Kennedy hadn't been assassinated in 1963.

By calling her husband's term as president "Camelot" in an interview with the magazine *Life*, Jackie Kennedy established the narrative of a collective memory that provided a framework of interpretation for countless writings, articles and scientific studies up to this day. *From Camelot to Kent State*, for example, is a look back at America in the 1960s, and while there is only one mention of Camelot in the book besides the title, everybody knows that part of the volume is about the Kennedy era. In the end, the narrative created was so successful that we might bump into books even today that somehow reference Camelot. Three of the most important scholars in the field of the Camelot metaphor (thereafter referred to as the School of Camelot) are Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Theodore Sorensen, and William Manchester. Despite being an outstanding historian, and an eyewitness — and earwitness — to many events as Kennedy's classmate at Harvard, due to his blind infatuation with Kennedy, Schlesinger Jr. became the main architect behind the School of Camelot, rather than the author of a sober historical work.

Besides the idolaters, I must mention authors like historian and journalist David Greenbert, whose works represent no historical or literary value, are full of vague references and serve only to earn money for the author. Works like these, including *Killing Kennedy: The End of Camelot* by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, are often

more suitable for an easy, summer-evening read than a serious historical work. Of course, there will always be authors who would like to harness the latest trends and reap profits by marketing themselves and their books as the next big sensation. Some historians, however, don't stop at making vague references. Thomas Reeves portrayed Kennedy as a compulsive womanizer (*A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy*, 1991), while Timothy Lear painted him as an LSD abuser (*Flashbacks*, 1997). Seymour M. Hersch even merged the Kennedys with the mob (*The Dark Side of Camelot*, 1998). Even though Nigel Hamilton based his book about their internal family relationships on rumors (*JFK: Reckless Youth*, 1993), it was enough to spark the Kennedys' wrath, who took to *The New York Times* to respond. Years later, Hamilton recalled his hardships in *The Huffington Post*. But this was not the first time the family exercised censorship over certain articles. While constructing the legend of Camelot, Jackie crossed out the parts of Theodore H. White's drafts she had deemed unnecessary and requested that the writer focus on Camelot. The legal troubles around William Manchester's book (*The Death of a President*, 1967) had shown how Jackie and the people surrounding her (including the late president's brother, Bobby Kennedy) aimed to control historical works related to JFK. Edward and Jean Kennedy Smith, for example, gained unlimited access to the manuscript for David Nasaw's book about Joseph P. Kennedy (*The Patriarch: The Remarkable Life and Turbulent Times of Joseph P. Kennedy*, 2013).

The complexity of the situation is perhaps best illustrated by the heated debate surrounding Kennedy's death. While there seems to be a consensus that the trigger was pulled by Lee Harvey Oswald, some are unable to accept the simple fact that, as Norman Mailer put it, "a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security." Even today, we can find writings obsessively searching for the truth and the "background power" (the mafia, CIA, FBI, KGB or Fidel Castro and the Cubans) that ordered the murder, as well as new clues based on which the official version of the lone assassin can be refuted. Although these are, of course, undoubtedly exciting, film-fitting motives, no one has come up with concrete evidence so far.

Despite what has been outlined above, we can conclude that each of the listed works can prove useful in the preparation of my dissertation, providing that the necessary critical sense is retained. Robert Dallek's volume (*An Unfinished Life. John F. Kennedy 1917-1963*, 2004) is unquestionably the most thorough and exhaustive work of the past 60 years about John F. Kennedy; it therefore provided one of the most important supports to my dissertation, as well as his works of the last 60 years, which consist of invaluable research. From a completely different perspective, the excellent works by Mark White (*A Cultural History of an American Icon*, 2013) and Steven Watts (*JFK and the Masculine Mystique*, 2016) have also been of great help to me.

Obviously, the primary sources that provide a more nuanced picture of and/or solidify Kennedy's image are not negligible either. Similarly, interviews, press-briefing transcripts, speeches, reports and newspaper articles of the time, as well as online sources from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, have also been invaluable.

The aim and methodology of the research

Like all politicians, Kennedy fought hard to highlight his qualities and bury his limitations, imperfections and human weaknesses as deep as possible. His family, friends and followers had an amazing flair for articulating the messages about him that have been shaping the image of the 35th President of the United States in the eyes of millions ever since. I would like to outline President Kennedy's political picture from the recollections, newspaper articles, interviews, recordings, conversations, press conferences, oral history interviews and often-repeated facts. The purpose of my dissertation is not to expose. I have no intention of coming across a detail that has not yet been discovered nor of revealing any secrets. I strive to reconstruct, through the glamorous, almost impenetrable mask that had been woven by many, how the image of John F. Kennedy was built, thanks to the many decades of diligent work – an image that did not fade but was even strengthened by his death. But was he really as great a president as opinion polls show? To what extent do the failures of his presidency overshadow his political image? Was

he just an irresponsible, lightweight politician who got where he got thanks to his father's money? Was he the first celebrity president of the United States?

In order to get a realistic picture, it is worth looking for answers to these questions by contrasting the real political performance of the president with the image that the press has made of him. The result will be a description of a man whose virtues and faults will make him both exceptional and ordinary. He was an extremely intelligent, highly motivated politician with a strong will to fight and thirst for knowledge; he was curious about the world, with the intention of shaping it. Meanwhile, his entire life was accompanied by physical pains and emotional problems. Nowadays, it most likely goes without saying that the media has great power, even if those who call it the fourth branch of power are not necessarily right. In the course of my work, I pay special attention to the relationship between Jack Kennedy and the press, not only the American but with references to the Hungarian press as well.

In addition to historical works of an economic, military and political nature, other areas that are otherwise extremely important, such as the role of the press and the media in a given period, are often neglected. The research will contribute not only to the Hungarian-language historical analysis of the Kennedy era but also to a better understanding of this period. The 1960s were an extremely interesting and watershed decade in all aspects. And with the

culmination of the Cold War, they were a very important point in the history of the bloody 20th century, leaving a powerful mark on posterity.

Results

But why Kennedy? Why is the political image of an American president killed almost 60 years ago interesting? What example can his political image provide for modern politicians of our time? These questions are legitimate, reasonable and extremely exciting. It is safe to say that John F. Kennedy was the first modern president of the United States, whose media image was built consciously in parallel with his professional career. Some of the stages of his career (war hero, bestselling writer, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, U.S. representative, senator, American president) are frames that can be interpreted independently, but when placed side by side, they form a complex picture. The man himself, the politician who, with his appearance, presence and attire (just think of the thin ties; double-breasted, tailored suits; or the iconic Ray-Ban sunglasses), created a style that men still confidently rely on even today.

Of course, these factors are only part of the magic. Claims suggesting that his father's influence, network of relationships and wealth played a key role in JFK's success only scratch the surface and ignore an important factor: the immeasurable humility and thirst

for knowledge that characterized him. After all, he could have lived the carefree life of a playboy from Joe's fortune, he could have avoided work on account of his health problems, but instead, he was constantly training himself, expanding his knowledge and pushing his boundaries.

The intense campaign strategy of his political career, ranging from messages to a specific target audience to fundraising and gathering volunteers, is still echoed in the world's political campaigns today. Live television statements, speeches and press conferences are now regarded as basic elements in the toolbox of political communication, while these were considered unorthodox during Kennedy's presidency. It was just as unprecedented that the leader of the world's greatest power would let the press into his private sphere, thanks to which it was not the politician but the man himself that appeared in the columns of the papers.

His sexual adventures, as revealed later, as well as his state of health, did not hurt him either, as these too only proved that he was just a person like anyone else, with his own flaws. However, these flaws pale in comparison to the fact that, with perseverance, attitude, diligence and "talent" (Matthew 25: 14-30), he embodied the American dream longed for by all who chose the United States as their homeland for a better life.

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